

Interview with Mrs. Joan H. Bartlett

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Program

Foreign Service Spouse Series

JOAN H. BARTLETT

Interviewed by: Annabel Ebersole

Initial interview date: May 11, 1990

Q: This is Annabel Ebersole. Tape #1

I wanted to ask you about your life growing up. Did you grow up in New England?

BARTLETT: Yes, I was born in Sudbury, Massachusetts and grew up there and I went to schools near Boston. I went to college in Montreal. That was my first overseas post.

Q: And when did you meet your husband?

BARTLETT: We met just before I began college in 1955, through a mutual friend. He was at Dartmouth, and we kept the romance going between Hanover, New Hampshire and Montreal, which wasn't too far away.

Q: And after Dartmouth, (you said he's a lawyer) where did he go to law school?

BARTLETT: He went to Harvard. We got married the week after he graduated from college. And then he went to law school for three years and he practiced law for about two years before joining the Foreign Service.

Q: Were you working during the time he went to law school?

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BARTLETT: I was having babies. I had part-time jobs. Tom was born just as he began his first year of law school and then my second one was born just as he was finishing his last year.

Q: How long were you in Washington before you had your first post?

BARTLETT: We were there for six months, three months of which was language training. So, six months in all and we were off to Paris for the first posting. I was lucky.

Q: What was your life like in Paris? Did you have help and were you able to see a lot of the city and sites?

BARTLETT: Yes. We had an au pair to help us out. We lived there in very nice embassy housing. We traveled around Paris quite a bit, went out in the evenings and had a wonderful time! And Sam was low enough in posting at the Embassy so we weren't required to do too much in the way of entertaining and so forth. So we kind of lived our own life, which was very nice. We had a wonderful Ambassador, Charles Bohlen, and there was good morale. We were only there for a year and a half and he was asked to go to The Hague. So we had sort of a split posting between Paris and The Hague. So we just rolled over to Holland and began our second posting. Put the kids in the car, the cats and dogs, and drove to Holland.

Q: And when was your third child born?

BARTLETT: She was born just before we came in the Foreign Service.

Q: So you had three children.

BARTLETT: Yes.

Q: What was your experience like in Holland?

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BARTLETT: I really recommend Holland as a nice place to raise children. There is a lot of outdoor life there. The Embassy was small enough so that you knew everybody. We knew a lot of people from other embassies too. The Dutch had a tradition called Club de Jeudi, which was a club for diplomats. I think they met one Thursday a month, so we got to know the people from the other Embassies and that was fun and we made good Dutch friends who are steadfast still. They keep writing and we visit back and forth.

Q: What was the interaction like among the women, the other wives at the embassy? Was your Ambassador's wife nice to work with in terms of helping at functions?

BARTLETT: Every time we came to a party, at which we would have a good time, she always said, "Thank you so much for helping out." I never felt that I had to show up at a party or function anywhere during my Foreign Service days. I always felt they could get along without me, so if something was wrong with the children, I'd stay home. It was a nice group, a very nice group there at the embassy.

Q: The Hague strikes me as a lovely place from which to travel to see other parts of Europe also.

BARTLETT: Yes, it was.

Q: Did you go to Denmark?

BARTLETT: No, we didn't go to Denmark, in fact, we seemed to keep heading back to France. When we were in Paris, we had rented a house south of Paris for a few weeks one summer, and we did that again when we were in Holland. And we went skiing in Austria and Germany and Switzerland.

Q: Was there an American school or did the children go to a Dutch school?

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BARTLETT: There was an international school. Our oldest two went there. Our youngest went to the local nursery school.

Q: Did she wear a smock?

BARTLETT: No, I don't think it was a smock exactly. I went to visit the teacher once and I thought my Dutch was quite good and I tried to use it whenever I could. This lovely young teacher was saying to me "Mary is ..." I can't remember the words now, and I said, "Oh, wonderful, wonderful. I'm so glad to hear that." But I went home and looked it up and what she said was, "Mary has been biting and scratching." I guess she was so frustrated because she couldn't make herself understood that she was sort of attacking other children so I had to go back and have another longer talk when I found out what that actually meant.

Q: Language can trip us up.

BARTLETT: That's what makes life interesting.

Q: And then you went to Cebu. So you had a drastic change in pace, Cebu is in the Philippines. Did the children like Cebu?

BARTLETT: Oh, they loved it there. The Filipino's are so welcoming and especially, I think, out of Manila. It's a small enough town, so it's easy to get around. We had wonderful friends there. It almost seemed like one long party when we were there. We would have luncheons, teas and dinners. We had lots of household help. The nice thing I think there too was that a lot of events, especially on weekends, the children were included. We'd have big beach parties and we'd go to a little house with a couple of other people, a local Philippine couple and the Peace Corps doctor and his wife. We all became quite good friends. We built a house up in the mountains the three families together using our old

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packing crates from Holland as the wood for the sides, and we had a straw roof. We used to drive up there every other weekend or so to get some cooler weather.

Q: You must have lovely memories and pictures of that.

BARTLETT: It was really special. It was called Busay, (the name of the town was Busay). We later, when we came back to Washington, we bought a sailboat and we named it Busay.

Q: Were you involved in any volunteer work at either of these posts, The Hague or Cebu?

BARTLETT: In Cebu I did some work at the Southern Islands hospital. There was a marvelous man there named Dr. Solon who was working with malnutrition. He was trying to set up a program to follow up on malnourished children after they left the hospital because there was so much recidivism (they kept coming back). He wanted people to go and follow up in their homes to help teach them nutrition and health, and so I helped with that.

I don't think I did any volunteer work in The Hague. One thing I did was I played in an orchestra there.

Q: Where was it you studied violin?

BARTLETT: I had taken lessons as a youngster, and I played in school orchestras. I started taking lessons in Paris.

Q: Was it international? Was it a small group or an orchestra?

BARTLETT: It was a small group.

Q: So after Cebu, you came back to Washington for a period of five years.

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BARTLETT: Yes.

Q: And how old were the children by then? Were they all in school?

BARTLETT: Yes, they were. I think Mary, the youngest, was just going in the 1st grade. She didn't know how to read, or her numbers or her alphabet. She had some pretty fast pedaling and catching up to do. But she did! So by the 2nd or 3rd grade, she was at the level of her classmates.

Whereas Tom, who was going into 7th grade and Molly, who was starting 4th grade did very well. There was a tiny little American school in Cebu that really prepared them well.

When we returned to Washington in 1970, we had some pretty rocky and difficult years. We had been living the high life out on an island in the middle of the Pacific fairly oblivious to what was going on in the world, in our country, and in our family. This was the post sixties, Vietnam, pre-Watergate, busing era — Washington was highly-charged. We were finding that all the fun and partying we were used to abroad and were trying to continue at home had become a bit sour.

My husband joined AA [alcoholics anonymous] in 1975 and has been a loyal and active member ever since. AA was a large part of our lives from then on and we had three more overseas posts before he retired. But we kept it a secret from everyone but other AA members. I was very proud of my husband: that he addressed his problem, that he sought help and that he continued to “work the program” (For those who don't know AA, this involves, among other things, readings every day, meetings once or twice a week, helping others). Sam has done very well himself and has helped many others in the past 20 years. Yet I felt we were living a double life. (We were so good at covering it up, that to this day people we've known overseas, when they come to visit, bring Sam wine or gin as a houseguest present.) In retrospect, I think it was not a psychologically healthy way for me to live. What he called “protecting his anonymity”, involved a tangled web of deceit.

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And a lot of the lies and smoothing things over both within the family and to the outside world was for me to do.

Things are quite different now. There is so much openness about drug and alcohol abuse. However, twenty or so years ago, drinking, even drunkenness, was far better than admitting that one was an alcoholic.

Ottawa was our first overseas posting after joining AA and it was a good one. There were many meetings Sam could go to and it was an easy transition because it did not involve a new language. We were very happy in Ottawa — we love winter sports, camping and hiking, and Canada had all of those. And I had become very involved in the community, playing in a chamber music group and an orchestra and doing volunteer work at the museum. So it was a particularly hard post to leave and I felt we were really going off into the unknown.

Q: Had you kept your house in Washington?

BARTLETT: No. That was one of the hardest things I had to do. Our orders read “Ottawa to El Salvador, with six months language training in Washington.” But only for my husband was language training. The rest of the family was supposed to go to the home leave address. Well, all we had was a post office box in New Hampshire as our home-leave address. Sam sent me down to Washington to try to find a house. And at that time we had three kids and a couple of dogs and some cats. And to try to rent a house, for six months with that menagerie at a price we could afford was impossible. I'd go from one place in the State Department to another, trying to get some help; trying to get someone to tell me what I was supposed to do. I called up a friend and told her what was happening to me. She told me about the newly-created FLO Office which proved to be a great source of help and comfort! We went to Washington as a family in September of 1978 and Sam went to El Salvador in February. Molly was in her senior year of high school about to graduate, so I

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stayed in Washington with the two girls. Tom was in college. We were all going to join Sam in El Salvador in June.

But a week before we were to go, Sam called up and said there's been some really bad stuff, a Swiss diplomat was kidnapped and things were getting kind of touchy, and that we had better not come. So I came up here for the summer. He came home in August and we put Mary into boarding school up here. They had a good school in El Salvador, a good high school, one of the best in Central America, but the country was in such a state of upheaval, we knew she might have to leave at any point, so there was no point in starting her. She was going into 9th grade and Molly started college in Canada that fall.

Q: What was Sam's position at that point in the Embassy?

BARTLETT: He was the Consul. It was a rough time there. I joined him there in September. Everybody was coming for Christmas including Sam's parents and all our children. Sam's mother was going to bring us a dog. We called her up at the last minute because in November the Ambassador decided that the dependents would have to leave in December. But our children came and we had a funny sort of Christmas. Then on New Year's Day, I drove home with two of the children. Molly went as far as Mexico City and took a plane back to Canada. Tom drove the whole way back with me. It was wonderful. I loved seeing Mexico. When we left El Salvador, we didn't have a guidebook or a map, so we had unexpected adventures and surprises along the way.

Q: Had you taken any household possessions to El Salvador?

BARTLETT: Yes

Q: Did they stay behind with your husband?

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BARTLETT: Yes. I think I packed up a few things in case he had to get out fast, he could. As it turns out, he did get out fast. I came out in January. He was due to come out around October. He appeared at the door in August. There had been a death threat on him.

Q: Were there many bombs going off? Did you have to look under the car?

BARTLETT: Yes. Oh, yes.

Q: I guess one becomes accustomed to it. Did you have a house with security?

BARTLETT: We had a pretty good wall and a pretty good guard who used to fall asleep in his chair every night. We also had a watchdog, which is said to be the best thing to have. Sam always varied the route to work. It was sort of funny; I'd ride with him to work at the embassy sometimes and we'd try to remember whether we turned right or left yesterday. Always trying to figure out which route to take. I worked at the embassy for a while on the emergency evacuation. This was at the same time Iran had taken hostages. So, the embassy was very aware and wanted to be prepared if that might happen. We mapped out the whole of El Salvador and marked where American's lived and planned how we could get them together in case everybody had to get out.

Q: Did the GSO handle the household concerns?

BARTLETT: We didn't get that far.

Q: It was a very valuable thing to have done.

BARTLETT: One of the things we were trying to do was to go through this huge book of what has to be done in an emergency at an embassy. I tried to convert it to one sheet of paper.

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When we were there, the embassy was attacked and the archbishop was shot. But, in spite of all these terrible things, there were nice things to remember.

Q: When you were surrounded and attacked, did the Marines fight them off or did friendly El Salvadorians chase away the rebels?

BARTLETT: It was the El Salvadorians who protected the embassy. They were backed up by the Marines. There was no shooting, but they were surrounded at the embassy. I was not at the embassy at the time.

Q: It takes one several months to stop looking under cars here, doesn't it?

BARTLETT: Very much so. And not to jump when you hear a car backfiring.

Q: And to feel comfortable in a house without a wall around it.

BARTLETT: Our house was in a suburban neighborhood and there was a wall in the front. People would build their walls higher and higher. I remember taking walks in San Salvador, which I wasn't supposed to do, but I'd go out and look at people's gardens and pretty soon I couldn't see anybody's gardens because of the walls.

Q: So you were there for only four months?

BARTLETT: Just four months.

Q: Then you came home to Plymouth?

BARTLETT: No because at that time this house was rented out. So I came to Boston and rented an apartment. The department that deals with emergency evacuations was so wonderful! They kept calling up, to see if everything was all right and to see if I was getting my checks on time.

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Q: Oh, good!

BARTLETT: We've never been so rich! I got allowances such as separate maintenance and I was working as well.

Q: What sort of job did you have?

BARTLETT: I was a secretary to an Education Consultant. It's an organization, which everyone in the State Department should know about. They help find the right school for your child. They do a whole battery of testing. There's another one like it in Washington.

Q: So that brings us up to 1980-1981.

BARTLETT: Sam took a sabbatical year just so we could pull all the family together. We did stay in this house that year after he came back from El Salvador. He always wanted to be a lobsterman or fisherman, but he was offered a job at Raytheon covering their Latin American distributorship. They made office equipment at that time. He went all over Latin America. He loved it! Then we went to Washington and he worked on Capitol Hill as State Department Liaison on Latin America.

Q: So where did you live then?

BARTLETT: We lived in a little house in Hollin Hills in Alexandria. Then we moved to Ireland.

Q: He was the Consul General in Northern Ireland?

BARTLETT: Yes

Q: You must have met some really interesting people!

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BARTLETT: Yes, we did. The consul's house was the only place the Catholics and Protestants were comfortable socializing. The fourth of July party was one of the big events of Northern Ireland. We had 300 people at the house.

Q: The children got two trips per year at that time?

BARTLETT: Yes. It was two a year, round trips.

Q: Christmas and the summer.

BARTLETT: Our son, Tom, was too old. He was a schoolteacher at the time and did an exchange teaching assignment in Bristol, England.

Q: Which country would you like to go back to for a vacation?

BARTLETT: France. We'd like to go back to El Salvador and see our friends there, but I think it's always your first post you want to go back to.

Q: Have you felt the changes for wives since the 72 Directive? How did it change things for you?

BARTLETT: It didn't really hit me. I wasn't too serious about being "the diplomat's wife" anyway. I did my own thing. Sam told me in the beginning not to worry about it. He said it wouldn't make any difference to his career. Overall, I think it's a shame they changed because we weren't able to work overseas, and it was something you did as your job. Each person has a different nature, and I wouldn't have been a career person anyway. It's good that they are working out things for the wives who do want to work. It was a part of my identity during that time. The first time I did "representational entertaining" was in Belfast. I did a lot! I liked it. I felt it was a job, although a non-paying one. I got quite efficient; doing all the menus and books. In Northern Ireland, most women I knew did the

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same thing I did. They lived in big houses and castles and there weren't a lot of servants so they did their own work.

Q: How do your own children feel about representation? Do you think they enjoyed their experience?

BARTLETT: I think they did. And they are all three very broad-minded. I did feel guilty because our lifestyle was so disrupting to their lives. But around the time of our son's graduation, we had a talk about how well he had done in spite of his rotten life. He didn't think it was rotten. I don't think they suffered too much. What they gained is something deep down in their souls. Unfortunately they never learned to speak a language.

Q: They were never at the right age for the post you were stationed at, were they?

BARTLETT: That's right. Molly went to a bilingual school in Paris for kindergarten. Later she attended a bilingual high school in Ottawa. She started the school year with maybe one word of French and by the end of the year, she was spouting it out.

Q: What about the Maracycle?

BARTLETT: This was thought up by an organization that tries to get more understanding between northern and southern Ireland. We started out at 7:00 in the morning in Belfast and cycled to Dublin, which is about one hundred miles.

Q: Did they have lemonade stands?

BARTLETT: They had lots of refreshment places set up in every little town. The mayor would come out and cheer people on. People sat in their houses and clapped. It was a great day. I almost gave up a little beyond the half way mark. Someone came along behind me and said, "Come on, lassie, you can do it, keep going!" That cheered me on so I kept on going. Everybody whooped it up that night in Dublin. There were bands and dances, and other things like that. The next day, we went back again. I went by car. My

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husband went both ways. It was about 3 days before the fourth of July. I kept thinking about standing up at the reception!

Q: And you had just had someone graduate?

BARTLETT: Yes. Mary had just graduated from college. That was a spring we will always remember.

Q: From 1970 to 1975, did you see much of other State Department wives when you lived in Washington?

BARTLETT: Not really. We tried to see people we already knew. No, I didn't see many wives, and I didn't have much to do with the State Department while I was there either. I was more involved in life in Alexandria, where we lived.

Q: Was Sam pleased with his career?

BARTLETT: I think so. We look back on it as having been a lot of fun. There were frustrations: the red tape or bureaucratic details that have to be worked out. I suppose he would have liked to have been an Ambassador. But you had to take a lot of Washington assignments so that you would be known. We were very lucky in our postings. I think Sam found them absolutely fascinating from the working point of view, and, from the living point of view, I thought they were interesting too. Even that time when I returned back here to the States, and he remained in El Salvador, that separation may have been good. Maybe every 25 years, it's good to live apart from one another for a while. You can regather your own self. I think he was ready to retire when he did.

Q: I guess business had less red tape. The business mentality is different from what we find at the State Department.

BARTLETT: I think it's good when people see it from both sides. Otherwise you have that "pie in the sky" mentality, where you think it's so much better in the private sector, but

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when you get in it, you find it has it's own problems. I think the thing he misses most, and I do too, are the people in the Foreign Service. The bright, funny, witty, clever people we knew.

Q: And when you all become like one another's family when you don't have the cousins and uncles, make you become a lot closer.

BARTLETT: I think also, the experience of moving brings a family close.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Samuel

Spouse's Position: Political, Consular

Spouse Entered Service:1965Left Service: 1986You Entered Service:SameLeft Service:

Status:Spouse of Retiree

Posts:

1965-66Paris, France

1966-68The Hague, Netherlands

1968-70Cebu, The Philippines

1970-75Washington, DC

1975-78Ottawa, Canada

1978-80San Salvador, El Salvador

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1980-81(Boston, Massachusetts)

1981-83Washington, DC

1983-86Belfast, Ireland

Place/Date of birth: Waltham, Massachusetts; February 15, 1938

Maiden Name:Joan M. Harding

Parents:Theodore and Elizabeth Harding, carnation growers

Schools (Prep, University): Dana Hall, McGill University

Profession: Tour Guide, Ocean Spray Cranberry Association

Date/Place of Marriage: June 21, 1957; Sudbury, Massachusetts

Children:

Thomas, b. 1958

Molly, b. 1961

Mary, b. 1964

Positions held (Please specify Volunteer or Paid):A. At Post: Too scattered to list

B. In Washington, DC:

End of interview